

**THE GREATEST ENEMY
IS WITHIN**

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The more obvious hindrances to the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ are not necessarily the most deadly. Perils of geography, difficulties of communication, opposition of false religions, persecution by unfriendly governments--while all of these are powerfully obstructive, the greatest enemy is within. Even in the heat of the Reformation, Luther had the honesty to say, "I am more afraid of my own self than of the Pope and all his cardinals. Because I have within me the great pope, Self."

It is easier, of course, and more self-satisfying to blame evangelistic set-backs on external enemies. But the more searching question is how much of the blame for failure we must share ourselves. What are the hindrances within the Church?

Some have been discussed elsewhere in the Congress: spiritual indifference, sacerdotalism, heresy. But another may be even more dangerous because it is so often unrecognized. This is the sin of self-containment. It may be defined as a lack of meaningful contact with the non-Christian world. It comes in many forms, but whether it is caused by willful indifference, or fear of contamination, or ignorance, or selfish pre-occupation with the Christian community itself, the result is what contemporary theologians call "the Christian ghetto complex."

Of all the internal obstacles mentioned above this is most nearly fatal, for it so closely partakes of the very essence of sin--that is, a love of self that crowds out love of God

and love of neighbor. Self-containment is sub-Christian, or perhaps more accurately, pre-Christian, for the Christian life begins with the new birth; the very imagery of the language suggests a breaking-out from a self-containing womb into a world of awareness and contact and need. The pattern of the new life is the self-emptying Christ (Phil. 2:3-8), not the self-satisfied Pharisee (Luke 18:9-11). At no point is the Christian self-contained; he is either Christ-sustained or dead. As for Christian mission and evangelism, self-containment and outreach are mutually exclusive. The church that is turned in upon itself has turned its back on the world to which it was sent by Jesus Christ.

There is no need to labor the point further. Self-containment is a basic denial of all that is Christian. The problem is that few will admit to having this disease. It is always someone else's problem, some other church's crippling weakness.

There is the classic example of a "Christian ghetto," the fate of Eastern Christianity under the Moslem conquerors. While often compassionately described as the inevitable result of persecution, this is not altogether true. It was, in the final analysis, the deliberate choice of the Church. What finally produced the withered ghettos of the Nestorians and the Copts was not so much the sword of Islam as the law of Islam, which permitted conquered Christians to worship but forbade them to propagate the Christian faith. Faced with a choice between survival and witness, the Church chose survival. It turned in upon itself. It ceased to evangelize. It survived, but what survived was no longer a whole Church. It was a sick, ingrown community.

In Czarist Russia, Christian withdrawal was even less of an imposition from without than what the Eastern churches experienced. The Russian church made its own ghetto, but in the mind, not the body. Isolating themselves from the agony of the people, Orthodox priests argued about the color of their vestments and about how many fingers should be extended in the benediction, until the revolution broke in on them and brought them, too late, out of their never-never land of liturgy into the world as it really is.

It would be comforting to think that such crippling self-containment is safely buried in the Church's past. The sadening truth is that no church in the world is quite free from the taint of the same poison.

There is self-containment of race, for example, and self-containment of liturgy. Separatism is another form of self-containment. So also is its opposite, preoccupation with

church union. There is also the self-containment of the great, state churches, too intent on national prestige, ceremonies and subsidies to notice that they no longer have worshipers. And there is the self-containment of the small, free churches, so busy protecting their freedom from the world that they have ceased to have any influence in the world. There is self-containment by creed, and self-containment by sacrament. There is the self-containment of old and tired churches who no longer want to send missionaries; and the self-containment of younger, nationalist churches who no longer want to receive them.

But no matter what form it takes nor how plausibly its forms may be justified, self-containment is always and inevitably a hindrance to evangelism.

Take, for example, racial self-containment. This is probably the single most explosive issue in the world today. When racial discrimination penetrates the Church, it becomes more than a crime against humanity, it is an act of defiance against God himself (I John 4:20). In America, eleven o'clock Sunday morning has been called the most segregated hour. I do not believe this is true, but that such a statement could be made at all is indictment enough. The fact that there is any racial discrimination in the Christian Church has already done irreparable damage to world evangelism. If present trends continue, future historians may some day single this out as the decisive factor that drove a whole continent, Africa, away from Christ and into the embrace of Islam.

Another form of this sin is self-containment by caste. Christians would like to pretend that this is limited to India and its Hinduism, but our own Western, Christian suburbs are riddled with it. It is more subtle in the West. When the Church of England in the nineteenth century could be described as the Conservative Party gathered for prayer, and when a recent study of American church unions can point out that they never really cross class lines but usually remain a high-caste denominational phenomenon (R. Lee, The Social Sources of Church Unity, 1960), it can hardly be claimed that Christians have bravely broken down the barriers of class. The Church's social structure has become so self-contained in America that some sociologists assert that it purposefully excludes the lowest classes of American society from its evangelistic efforts. "Church programs are not designed to appeal to them and ministers never visit them . . .", say Vidich and Bensman in Small Town in Mass Society (Quoted by P. Gerger, in The Noise of Solemn Assemblies, 1961). "The ministers and laymen . . . either do not

see the unchurched or they have no desire to pollute the church membership with socially undesirable types."

All unwittingly, Christians sometimes shut themselves behind a language barrier. Evangelical jargon can be as unintelligible outside the inner circle as military alphabetese is outside the Pentagon. In a world where "redemption" means green stamps, and "sin" means sex, the very words with which we try to proclaim the Gospel sometimes only obscure it. It can be dangerous therefore to read nothing but evangelical literature. The man who lives in a one-vocabulary world too long loses the ability to talk meaningfully to anyone but his fellow-believers; this is not evangelism.

Another kind of self-containment is separatism. It is as old as the Syrian desert where Anchorites chained themselves to rocks or walled themselves up in caves. It is also, alas, as new as the latest church split in Korea. As a search for purity, separatism may have a touch of justification, but its fatal flaw is self-containment. It faces inward, not outward. It leads to negativism and withdrawal and self-righteousness. It talks evangelism, but its Christian outreach has lost its winsome appeal and has built into it a self-defeating pattern of schism and isolation that aborts the evangelistic invitation by the grimly exclusive attitude with which it is extended. There is no such thing as evangelism by separation. Every Christian should belong actively to at least one non-Christian--that is, not specifically Christian--organization in his community. Moreover he should join not just to evangelize it, but to understand it.

This last point is important. We defined the sin of self-containment as lack of meaningful contact with the non-Christian world. Perhaps this should be qualified. It is possible to have contacts that are meaningful, but only to one side. That kind of outreach only soothes the conscience or feeds the ego, it does not really break through the self-containment barrier. The Christian who is willing to meet the world only on his own terms, who feels no need to understand any position but his own, is still in his "Christian ghetto," and living to himself. His so-called contact with the world is counterfeit and artificial. His approach to others is gingerly self-protective, and carefully encapsulated from contamination.

Its defensiveness precludes any real meeting of minds. Its self-interestedness prevents the meeting of hearts and breaks down the one indispensable approach for any evangelism worthy of the name Christian, that is, the way of love.

There may be worse sins than self-containment, but few can more quickly blunt the growing edge of the Church of Jesus Christ. The Bible counts it as the accursed sin. This is no light condemnation. Its sign is the barren fig tree (Mark 11:12-14), heavy with leaves for its own self-beautification, but sterile and without fruit. When Jesus saw it, he cursed it.

**I WILL
BUILD
MY CHURCH**

WHEATON '83

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IN NEW
FRONTIERS
FOR MISSIONS**

DAVID A. FRASER, Editor